The Role of the Priest in Bioethical Decision Making

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Bill and his wife were long-time parishioners. He was a leader in a local church group and a well-known figure in town. Bill came to see me one day. A number of weeks earlier he had told me with great joy the news that his son and his wife were expecting their first child. It would be his first grandchild. But now his former expression of joy was replaced with concern. He explained that his daughter-in-law had been to the doctor for a regular sonogram. She was about four months along. The sonogram had detected something abnormal. After a whole battery of further tests they came back to the family and explained that the baby had very serious birth defects.

A whole team of doctors and specialists had consulted on the case and recommended that the pregnancy be terminated. Bill wanted me to meet with his son and daughter-in-law. I assumed at first what he wanted me to do was to reassure them of the teaching of the Church, that whatever defects the baby might have, however short its life, this baby was a beloved creation of God. Their role was to care for the child. What became apparent to me was that Bill was not asking me to do this. He was asking me to assure them that whatever they decided would be all right.

All names and identifying information about individuals in the real-life cases described in this essay have been changed.
I set up a meeting with the young couple and prayed to the Holy Spirit for words that would both comfort them and strengthen them to do what was right. When they came in, they were, as you might expect, very concerned and very emotional. They explained to me that the baby was diagnosed with trisomy 18, a genetic disorder in which the child has an extra chromosome in her genome. They were told that these babies rarely make it to birth, and if they are born alive, they can live only a short time. They were also told that carrying the baby to term would pose significant risks to the mother and that if the baby died in utero, the mother could face hematological (blood) problems. There was also the psychological strain of carrying a child who was so deformed and who would surely die.

They had made up their mind. Termination of the pregnancy was their only choice. The more I urged them to consider the life of the child, the more determined to have the abortion they seemed to become. At least, I begged them, get another medical opinion. They would not. They left very angry.

The father contacted me soon after that meeting. He was even more angry. Bill told me that not only was his daughter-in-law going to get the abortion, but he was going to pay for it. In a last-ditch effort to get him to change his mind I told him that he would incur an automatic excommunication if he assisted in that way. To my knowledge Bill and his wife have not returned to church since.

While I think in this case the moral guidance I was called to give was never in doubt, it illustrates well the emotionally charged and painful situations that arise. When they do, we can find ourselves on the horns of a dilemma: To whom should we listen? What are we to do when medical advice ventures into moral decision making? To whom can we look for guidance in the midst of these terribly complex and weighty ethical judgments? I would like to suggest here that the Church, especially through her official magisterium, is an essential part of the answer to these questions. Furthermore, priests should have a particularly decisive role in assisting the faithful as they seek to do what is right and good.

In elaborating these premises, there may well be two groups who will be disappointed and even take offense at my conclusions. They can be found at two opposing poles:

1. Those who feel that each human being is a law unto himself; that universal truths and intrinsic evils do not exist; and that each judgment is so unique to the person and circumstance that no real norms can be given.
2. Those who feel that the representative of the Church (the priest) should be able to resolve every issue without leaving any open questions at all; that the priest should lift from their shoulders their responsibility to be informed about what is right and to freely choose it.

Much more could be written than this single essay will allow, but I will attempt to say a little about the role of the Church and the priest, as well as the place of individual conscience. I will suggest to you some reasons that priests seem to be
hesitant today to fulfill their role, and propose some things that we might all do to assist in re-establishing this very necessary function of the priest. I will then offer a further illustration of another situation in which I found myself called upon to be a moral guide.

**The Church as Mater and Magistra**

From the time of the apostles the Church has been both *Mater et Magistra*, mother and teacher. She is gentle and loving, always reaching out to both saint and sinner alike, embracing them and urging them on. She also has the responsibility of being a teacher in the name of Christ. As the Body of Christ, she has been entrusted with his Word and the Tradition that she received from the apostles and maintained through the centuries. Through two thousand years, the Church has formally interpreted that Word and that Tradition. As each new question has arisen, she has drawn upon the Spirit’s enlightenment as she has guided the people of God and authentically reflected their faith.

In fact, her roles as mother and teacher are inseparable. Pope John Paul II expresses this beautifully in his encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (“The Splendor of Truth”) when he states,

> [T]he Church’s motherhood can never in fact be separated from her teaching mission, which she must always carry out as the faithful Bride of Christ, who is the Truth in person. ‘As Teacher, she never tires of proclaiming the moral norm ... The Church is in no way the author or the arbiter of this norm. In obedience to the truth which is Christ, whose image is reflected in the nature and dignity of the human person, the Church interprets the moral norm and proposes it to all people of good will, without concealing its demands of radicalness and perfection.’

The world, as well as we who are blessed to share this Catholic faith, needs to draw from the richness of the Church’s teaching. When it comes to moral questions, and particularly in the area of medical and biological ethics, the Church has a wealth of experience from which to speak. One does not even need to be a person of faith to benefit. Many of her principles, based as they are on natural law, can stand on their own, even though faith further clarifies and enlightens them.

Let us draw an example from the realm of political philosophy. During his lifetime at the end of the fourth century, St. Augustine spelled out some principles to guide leaders of nations in their decisions regarding whether they would be justified in going to war. The teaching of this Doctor of the Church, with some refinement, has become the teaching of the Church. Since the just war doctrine is based upon natural law, these principles have also been adopted by secular states. To this day, when nations enter into military conflict the debate is often about whether the conditions of the just war doctrine have been met.

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The Church has a wealth of principles, fully in accord with the Word of God, time-tested and timeless, expressed with amazing logical consistency, elucidated by some of the greatest minds the world has known. Drawing from this treasure, she is well able to address new challenges that technology throws our way. New principles are not needed, just careful study and application. This is the work of Catholic moral theologians who are well-trained and cognizant of the medical and biological facts.

Often the application of these principles in the concrete situation will be difficult because of the complexity of the factors involved. In some of these cases, it is up to the individual, or those representing him, under the guidance of medical personnel and (at least in the case of the Catholic) those who inform the individual on the Church’s teaching, to follow his well-informed conscience in his judgments. Medical personnel likewise have to judge in conscience whether or not they themselves can participate in a given procedure, based upon the same principles expressed officially by the Church.

**The Role of the Priest**

So what can we say about the role of the person who shares in the sacrament of Holy Orders, the bishop, priest or deacon? For the sake of discussion, let us focus on the priest charged to pastor the local flock. When we say the Church is mother and teacher we are not speaking only in the realm of abstract theological principle. It falls to those chosen by the Holy Spirit, and placed in positions of responsibility for the Lord’s flock, to embody this role of mother and teacher.

The Constitution of the Church, *Lumen gentium*, expresses well the role of those ordained to service in the Church. It states,

> Exercising within the limits of their authority the function of Christ as Shepherd and Head, they gather together God’s family as a brotherhood all of one mind, and lead them in the Spirit, through Christ, to God the Father. In the midst of the flock they adore Him in spirit and in truth [Jn 4:24]. Finally, they labor in word and doctrine [cf. 1 Tm 5:17], believing what they have read and meditated upon in the law of God, teaching what they have believed, and putting in practice in their own lives what they have taught.²

The priest is called to do the work of the Church, the work of Christ. Borrowing from St. Paul, we can say that the priest is to “make his own the mind of Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 2:5) To act in the person of Christ, he must act in the person of the Church, which is Christ’s Body. He is to represent God before the people and the people before God.

Priests are not called to be “free-lancers,” roving gurus dispensing secret knowledge or “Dear Abby” style advice. When people come to priests, they are not looking for a personal opinion, but want to hear what the Church has to say that would serve as guidance in their difficult decision. They want someone who will

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enter into their struggle, shining the light of Christ in their darkness through both his compassionate presence and his teaching.

When a person who is ill sits down with a doctor, he or she rightly expects the doctor to tell them the truth about their condition. They want the physician to say it gently and with compassion, but they want to know, they have a right to know, whatever the doctor can tell them. In the same way, when people come to the priest, no kindness is done by telling them that whatever they do is fine. They need to know, they have a right to know, what the Church teaches about their behavior or the matter about which they must decide. They have a right to know the truth. Armed with this knowledge, they will be able to act or not act as their conscience guides them.

Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard, a great mind of the Church around the time of the Second Vatican Council, called priests to claim their prophetic role. He stated, “One of the priest’s first services to the world is to tell it the truth. ... Like Christ, the priest brings mankind a priceless good, that of worrying it. He must be the ‘minister of restlessness,’ the dispenser of a new thirst and a new hunger.”

In his very timely encyclical “The Splendor of Truth,” our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, places before us the question of the rich young man of the Gospel, who asks the Lord, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” Note that Jesus’s answer to him is not simply, “Follow your conscience,” as though conscience were a law unto itself. Jesus’s response is to direct him to keep the commandments of God’s eternal law. Does this obligation violate his freedom, the freedom of his conscience? The Holy Father responds with a resounding, “No!” He states, “[T]here can be no morality without freedom.”

Although each individual has a right to be respected in his own journey in search of the truth, there exists a prior moral obligation, and a grave one at that, to seek the truth and to adhere to it once it is known. As Cardinal John Henry Newman, that outstanding defender of the rights of conscience, forcefully put it: ‘Conscience has rights because it has duties.’

We must use our freedom of conscience to seek that which is good and true. In this search, we have a serious responsibility to avail ourselves of the means God has given us through his Church. If we fail to do this, we are liable to be ignorant of the very truth our conscience seeks, the truth Jesus came to reveal. Freedom in its fullest sense is the freedom to choose the good. Without truth there is no freedom.

Why Priests Do Not Guide

The Church has a teaching that the world needs very badly. She needs to accompany people in the trials and the dilemmas that face them, offering her compassionate care and the ever-challenging light of truth. Priests, as those “taken from

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4Pope John Paul II, Veritatis splendor, n. 34.
5Ibid.
among men and made their representative before God” (Heb. 5:1), have a special responsibility to provide moral guidance. Yet, at least in recent decades, this guidance has often been hard to come by for several reasons, including the shortage of priests. One could say that this current shortage renders their teaching and guiding functions even more important. This work speaks to the essence of the ministerial priesthood. It is what priests are painstakingly trained and prayerfully ordained to do.

Why are we not often hearing moral teaching from priests on a wide variety of topics, from abortion, to cloning, to contraception; from capital punishment, to just wage, to just war? Why are we not hearing it from the pulpit, in our adult education classes, and in the reconciliation room? Why are we not hearing it in the pastor’s office and in the hospital room? There is no one nice neat answer, in my opinion. Allow me to list some of the reasons as I see them:

- Lay Catholics expect too much from the pulpit, and we clergy give them too little. Lay Catholics expect to get all they need to equip them for their life of faith in ten minutes on Sunday. The purpose of the homily is not, in the first instance, to teach moral principles. The homily is intended as part of the liturgical celebration, to amplify for the congregation the meaning of the scriptures that have been proclaimed and the feast that is being celebrated. Quoting the U.S. bishops’ *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, “The liturgical gathering is not primarily an educational assembly. Rather the homily is preached in order that a community of believers who have gathered to celebrate the liturgy may do so more deeply and more fully—more faithfully—and thus be formed for Christian witness in the world.”

This being said, the truth is that in our homilies we often say too little. Homilies too often betray a lack of preparation and a lack of conviction. They too often remain either pious abstractions with little application to daily life, or trite reflections on daily life that have little apparent connection with the Gospel.

- We can certainly find fault with preachers who fail to teach, but if you are a member of the laity (and here I include medical personnel), do not think that you are without fault. You very often have not wanted to know the answer. You have not wanted to know what the Church had to say, because you would rather not confuse the issue with the truth. Very often, you have considered your ideas the paragons of truth, and those self-defined “truths” just happened to coincide with what you wanted to do.

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People do not ask moral questions of priests today. They would rather consign priests to the realm of kind anachronisms who are always present when we need a little pomp and circumstance in our lives. We seek them out when, for instance, we want to baptize, marry, or bury, but we otherwise think it best to keep them out of the mix. If laypersons would more often ask priests about moral questions, they would be challenging priests to step up to the plate on these issues.

- Priests are called to be reflections of Christ, but since they “are taken from among men” (Heb 5:1), they can also be reflections of the prevalent mores of society. As such, priests today often feel plagued by the same confusing swirl of ideas that impact us all. They have lived through an age when many of the comfortable verities of the past have been swept from under our feet. The sight of leading theologians dissenting from the clear teaching of the Church brings into question, for many, everything the Church teaches. A teaching does not have to be labeled “infallible” to be deserving of our respect. A doctrine that has been consistently taught by the Church deserves to be given a lot more weight than does our own considered opinion.

- Another reason priests do not guide is that priests are focusing these days more on their role as compassionate companion than on their role as teacher. Perhaps they are reacting to a time when the model priests followed was more a military one. The priest commanded and the flock obeyed. He told you to jump and the only question permitted was, “How high?”

Priests have misunderstood the meaning of the word “pastoral.” As Pope John Paul II has said,

> What is pastoral is not opposed to what is doctrinal. Nor can pastoral action prescind from doctrinal content, from which in fact it draws its substance and real validity. Now if the Church is the ‘pillar and bulwark of the truth’ and is placed in the world as mother and teacher, how could she neglect the task of teaching the truth which constitutes a path of life?

Today priests have recovered a sense of the gentleness of Christ with the sinner, of his respect for their dignity and their freedom. Now they need to learn how to incorporate Christ’s willingness to confront when necessary, to challenge, and to call people to repentance.

This will be a challenging goal, because my sense is that among priests today (and perhaps it has been thus in every day) we have more teddy bears than prophets. Most priests (and bishops for that matter) just want to love and be loved. Except

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for the most crotchety old sourpuss (and we have all met a few priests like that),
most priests hate confrontation even more than the average person does. They will
sometimes even sacrifice their principles for the sake of peace.

The truth is that the opposition priests often have to face can be ferocious.
Religious issues touch so closely to the core of oneself that when something is said
or done by a priest contrary to what one feels, one’s response can often seem to
leave aside any semblance of Christian charity. As a celibate, the priest may not
have a support system to fall back on when he is facing opposition. It can be very
lonely out there when one feels that the community he has come to serve has turned
against him.

Another Case Study

Allow me to present another situation in which I was able to serve as a moral
guide. This is the case of Miriam. Miriam was an elderly lady who was dying from
chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, what we used to call emphysema. If one
can say this about a person who was dying, Miriam was a lady who was full of life.
She had an invincible spirit, a great sense of humor, and a lively spiritual life. As I
came to know her better, we had the opportunity to talk about death and dying. Our
parish nurse helped her to put together a durable power of attorney for health care
and a “Do Not Resuscitate” order. Miriam was on hospice care and she was ready
whenever God said it was time.

One morning we got the call that Miriam had been taken by ambulance to the
hospital. It turned out that she had been having trouble breathing. In her panic, she
had asked her caretakers to call the ambulance to get her help with breathing. When
we arrived at the hospital she had already been intubated—a step that I sincerely
doubted Miriam had wanted them to take.

The parish nurse and I visited with her daughters who had gathered there. I
explained to the family, as I had earlier to Miriam, the Church’s teaching on extraor-
dinary means and the distinction between actions that cause a person’s death and
actions that allow nature to take its course. They asked me to approach Miriam,
who was still conscious, to determine whether she wanted the respirator removed.
When I asked Miriam if she wanted the respirator removed, her response left no
doubt as to her desire. She vigorously shook her head “yes.”

The doctors felt that without the support of the respirator, they could keep her
comfortable, but there was nothing else they could do to keep her alive. I was able
to be with her when they removed the tubes, and then we gathered the family
around her bed to pray as she journeyed from this life to the next. Miriam prayed
along, but she did not die. Her respirations became stronger and more regular. Be-
fore long she was out of the hospital. She continued to delight us with her wit and
wisdom for several months before she died peacefully in her sleep.

I feel joyful whenever I think of Miriam, because it was an honor to have
known her, but also because I had the privilege of guiding her through the perilous
waters of dying to a peaceful death that happened in God’s good time.
The Priestly Calling

Technology unchallenged by ethical norms can be as potentially destructive as it may be beneficial. The Church throughout the centuries has amassed a body of principles that can be applied to these questions and provide a great service to the world.

Particularly for Catholics, the priest can and should continue to be both companion and guide as we face the incredibly challenging moral dilemmas of the day. If you want priests to reclaim their rightful role, then seek their guidance when you are faced with difficult moral decisions. Support and encourage them when they take unpopular stands in support of Church teaching. And, by all means, send your sons to the seminary. We need reinforcements here on the front line. I suspect that when priests once again claim their role as prophets, as well as gentle companions, the vocations will come.